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## Decentering Heart of Darkness

Perry Meisel

Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* creates the terms of its appeal by challenging us to specify the meaning Marlow tries to find in the character of Kurtz. Those readers who write about what they discover in Marlow's tracks pursue what Marlow himself says he is unable to disclose: the substance, the essence, the details of what it is that Kurtz has done, and what it is that he represents.

Answers to the enigma usually reveal a common predisposition among the novel's critics to assign highly concrete meanings to the tale, often of a psychological kind, and to take the multiplicity of clues provided by the narrative as indices of a significance to be found beyond the margins of the text. Stephen A. Reid, for example, is unhappy with the "unspeakable" nature of Kurtz's "lust and brutality" and claims that "it is necessary, psychologically, that Kurtz's rites have a particular content and a particular purpose."<sup>1</sup> Reid's determination to ground the text in specificity, and in psychology, leads him to replace Conrad's silence about the exact nature of Kurtz's behavior with Frazer's account of primitive customs in *The Golden Bough*. Leo Gurko is less specific, but equally insistent on a ground to the narrative, which is, in his words, "held aloft by the flame of external nature rooted at the bottom of the story."<sup>2</sup>

Albert J. Guerard's classic interpretation of the novel as "a journey within the self" offers a more flexible view of the tale, and indeed helps to generate the views of our first two critics. Still, there is in Guerard a similar desire for specificity, and, of course, for psychology, despite his insistence on the necessity of the "unspeakable" in Conrad's story. For Guerard, Kurtz's admittedly "unspoken" conduct succeeds in becoming the token of a struggle with the instincts: "[W]hen the external restraints of society and work are removed," says Guerard, "we must meet the challenge and temptation of savage reversion."<sup>3</sup>

Guerard's assumption that African culture is without "society" is necessary, of course, if his psychological symbolism is to hold. After all, if the novel's landscape is to be read as the terrain of the id, then its native inhabitants have to be cast as primitives. Guerard's assumptions thereby conflict with subsequent contentions in anthropology that there are no such qualitative differences as he supposes between European and "savage" cultures,<sup>4</sup> as well as with Conrad's own attempt to call such differences into question within the tale itself. Although the cannibal crewmen aboard Marlow's riverboat display, to his own surprise, a greater restraint than the novel's rapacious Europeans (104-105)\*, and even though Kurtz's

\*All references and citations from *Heart of Darkness* are from the *Youth* collection, Volume XVI of the *Complete Works*, Kent Edition (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1925).

“savage” woman stages a “stately” ballet of farewell for her departing lover (135-136), Guerard nonetheless insists on his primitivism in order to ground the tale’s meaning in the psychological categories he discerns in Conrad’s text.

The consequences of such a method are to be found in the problematic texture of the critical language it produces. What Guerard means by “the evil of vacancy” to which the “hollow” Kurtz “succumbs”<sup>5</sup> is a little difficult to tell in the light of his first argument. Surely “the temptation of savage reversion” carries with it some fecundity, some fullness of instinct which Guerard’s insistence on hollowness and vacancy, like Conrad’s own, seems to call into question. Indeed, Guerard falls into these same rhetorical contradictions time and again in his reading of the novel. “Marlow’s temptation,” he writes, “is made concrete through his exposure to Kurtz,”<sup>6</sup> despite his remark later on that Conrad is always “deferring what we most want to know and see.”<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the novel symbolizes “the night journey into the unconscious, and confrontation of an entity within the self,”<sup>8</sup> even though Kurtz’s vanishing act late in the story means, according to Guerard, that “a part of [Marlow, too] has vanished.”<sup>9</sup> This is critical language somehow divided against itself, stipulating the presence of meaning on the one hand, while noting the withdrawal of its ground on the other.

I suggest that Guerard’s contradictions derive from undue assumptions about Conrad’s text, and that his reading, like those of our other two critics, falls prey to the same epistemological temptations that Marlow is forced to overcome by the end of the tale. Indeed, it is Conrad’s radical understanding of how language itself creates and controls the kind of knowledge we have that constitutes Marlow’s deepest realization, one which he finds, in Conrad’s words, “altogether monstrous, intolerable to thought and odious to the soul” (141). It is, moreover, Marlow’s crisis in knowledge that allows us to see why Kurtz’s “vacancy” in the story is in fact necessary and inevitable, and that tends to supplant our critics’ psychological terror with a horror even more difficult to face.

It is Conrad’s epistemology that I wish to pursue here, and I shall take as my focus Marlow’s key conclusion about Kurtz, one based upon the evidence of the shrunk heads displayed before the Inner Station:

They only showed that Mr. Kurtz lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts, that there was something wanting in him—some small matter which, when the pressing need arose, could not be found under his magnificent eloquence. (131)

Marlow takes the heads as evidence for Kurtz’s lack of restraint (“showed”). Like the novel’s critics, Marlow draws his conclusion by taking such evidence as a token of what is not really present. Such inference leads to conclusions about the absence in another sense, too. What is present through the evidence is precisely Kurtz’s absence of morality—“that there was something wanting in him.” Kurtz has such a lack because he seems to be a lustful creature, full of desire—that is, “wanting,” like

Bellow's Henderson, in another sense. Indeed, "wanting" taken as the presence of desire depends upon "wanting" taken as the absence of gratification.

So in the middle of Marlow's assertive claim we find ourselves back to the kind of riddles that baffle him elsewhere in the novel. What Kurtz has depends on what he has not; what he has not depends on what he has. We seem trapped in a play of language at the very moment of Marlow's attempt to disclose some discovery about Kurtz, whose own name (meaning "short" in German) replays this same play.

This mutually interdependent relation between the two senses of "wanting," or of "short," suggests that meaning is a lateral event within language. Our critics, however, appear to share a view of language which, by contrast, presupposes some kind of direct, or symbolic, link between words and things, not only in Conrad, but also, for Guerard at least, in Freud.

It is Freud, however, who draws our attention to language as an oppositional, or lateral, mechanism as early as 1910, well before the notion receives its official introduction into linguistics proper with the publication in 1916 of Ferdinand de Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale*, and only eleven years after the publication of *Heart of Darkness* itself. In his brief essay on Karl Abel's 1884 pamphlet, "The Antithetical Meaning of Primal Words," Freud discovers an "astonishing"<sup>10</sup> philological explanation for contradictions in the language of dreams, and delights in its transformation by Abel into a synchronic rule about the mechanism of meaning in language as a whole. "Our concepts," writes Freud, "owe their existence to comparisons."<sup>11</sup> Citing from Abel's pamphlet, Freud provides us with the following account of why language and its conceptions constitute a relational or differential structure:

"If it were always light we should not be able to distinguish light from dark, and consequently we should not be able to have either the concept of light or the word for it . . ." "It is clear that everything on this planet is relative and has an independent existence only in so far as it is differentiated in respect of its relations to other things . . ." "Since every concept is in this way the twin of its contrary, how could it be first thought of and how could it be communicated to other people who were trying to conceive it, other than by being measured against its contrary . . . ?" . . . "Since the concept of strength could not be formed except as a contrary to weakness, the word denoting 'strong' contained a simultaneous recollection of 'weak,' as the thing by means of which it first came into existence. In reality this word denoted neither 'strong' nor 'weak,' but the relation and difference between the two, which created both of them equally . . ."<sup>12</sup>

The implications of Freud's and Abel's view of meaning as an "antithetical" formation are latent in Saussure as well, and all three suggest that signification takes place in a sphere apart from those states of the world to which it refers. If language means by virtue of differential or oppositional relations within the system it constitutes, then meaning is

the product of internal resonances within the system, rather than the effect of actual links between the system and real states of the world. Instead of a distance to be lamented and overcome, however, this distance between language and the world is a given since it is the signature of language—of culture—itself.

Thus it is the conditions of human usage as a whole that stipulate the kind of problem that Marlow confronts in the next section of the sentence we have been examining:

. . . some small matter which, when the pressing need arose, could not be found. . . .

It is the possibility of finding “some . . . matter,” in the sense of substance, that Marlow claims “could not be found,” even in its effect of producing nothing concrete to go by in the case of Kurtz. Of course, the differential meaning of “wanting” has already suggested what Marlow here makes explicit: that language—the inevitable medium of his interpretation of Kurtz—is in no position to discover the “matter” which Marlow, like all interpreters, wishes to assign to the elusive object of his quest. Because language is a differential or lateral phenomenon, it is not, after all, in a subject/object, or surface/depth, relation to the states of the world its signs appear to designate.<sup>13</sup>

But lest this recessive quality of “matter” seem merely fanciful, let us turn for a moment to the very start of the tale, where it is precisely these difficulties that Conrad discusses in broad terms. Marlow’s parable of the Roman official who came to Britain long ago is, of course, a caution he brings to bear on his own notions about the centrality of the Congo. To the Roman, Britain is the periphery of a circle whose center is Rome. And yet now, centuries later, Britain is itself the center of another circle whose periphery includes African colonies. By implication, the Congo will perforce comprise the center of still another, newer circle, whose periphery will in turn comprise the center of still another new circle, and so on, *ad infinitum*. The model, in other words, is epistemological as well as political. Every discovery of a center or an origin is subject to a decentering,<sup>14</sup> or, to put it another way, every disclosure of a ground is subject to the recession of that ground.<sup>15</sup> Conrad’s formulation helps to explain, and may even govern, the problem of Marlow’s quest for Kurtz, and the forever recessive object, or center, that Kurtz comprises.

It is just this shift or recession of centers that makes up the drama of Marlow’s search. Pursuing Kurtz to the Central Station, Marlow finds that there is still another center, the Inner Station. And having found Kurtz there, Marlow still finds the essential Kurtz to escape him again, since the object of his quest is a “shadow” (134), “unsteady, . . . pale, indistinct, like a vapour” (142). All Marlow has to work with is “a voice” (135), “discoursing” (113)—nothing, that is, but language. In this way, Kurtz has, in the Saussurean implications the text seems to affirm, “kicked himself loose of the earth” (144). In fact, Kurtz has “kicked the very earth to pieces” (144). As a piece of language, Kurtz is “wanting” the

"earth" or "matter" that Marlow wishes him to comprise, so as to make him an object concrete enough to seize upon. But because the recessive Kurtz is a mere series of contradictory, differential utterances (*kurtz*, for example, is twice described as "long," 134, 142), his ground—his objecthood—cannot be located. "There was nothing either above or below him," says Marlow, "and I knew it . . . I . . . did not know whether I stood on the ground or floated in the air" (144).

What is true of Marlow's search for Kurtz is true also of Marlow's very presence in the Congo. Notice, for example, that the "insoluble problem" (126) of the harlequin, "covered with patches all over, with bright patches, blue, red, and yellow" (122), resembles the map Marlow has seen in Brussels, with its "blue, a little green, smears of orange, and . . . a purple patch" (55). No wonder the harlequin's "aspect" reminds Marlow of "something funny [he] had seen somewhere" (122). Here at the real site to which the map's representations refer, Marlow finds simply another version of the (same) representation. That is, the grounded reality of what the map represents recedes from Marlow even as he stands upon it, turning as it does into a representation of itself much in the same way that Kurtz, too, is (only) language or representation.

This recession of presence, this decentering, is in evidence throughout the novel, and constitutes the book's active epistemological principle. In fact, it accords precisely with the famous definition of meaning attributed to Marlow at the start of the tale:

. . . the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine. (48)

Conrad's anonymous narrator discards the notion of meaning as a core or "kernel" without reservation, setting up instead a more problematic definition that plays upon the meanings of "spectral illumination." "Spectral" signifies "prismatic" and "phantom-like" at once, thereby defining meaning as without substance (in the sense of "specter"), multiple and prismatic (in the sense of "spectrum"), and at a distance from an original source of illumination ("moonshine").

All of these requirements are met, of course, in the tale itself, and, indeed, in our own Saussurean view of language, though they are by no means met in the tales our critics tell. What is more, it is precisely these requirements that Marlow meets again at the close of the sentence we have been examining:

. . . some . . . matter which . . . could not be found under his magnificent eloquence.

Just as there is no "kernel" inside, so there is nothing to "be found under" Kurtz's "eloquence." The reason has nothing to do, of course, with Kurtz's being any more of a liar than anyone else, but with the inescapa-

ble conditions of meaning itself. The “matter” of Kurtz’s meaning escapes Marlow not because this wishful essence is difficult to locate or, as the psychological critics might argue, because it must remain repressed, but because it simply does not exist. The geology of surface/depth meaning must give away, in Marlow’s understanding as well as in our own, to a lateral or surface topography—a map perhaps—of differential relations within a system of representations or signs.

Conrad, of course, is concerned with representations throughout the text. Even in our focus sentence, Kurtz’s eloquence is figured implicitly as a fabric or raiment (“under” makes “eloquence” a covering of some kind), while elsewhere in the text it is described directly as “folds of eloquence” (147), similar to the “diaphanous folds” (46) of the narrator’s own discourse. Like the book’s images of maps, documents, dress, ciphers, and so on, the numerous images of fabric constitute representations of representations, each one suggesting a weave or a network of relations much like the one presented by the text itself. These are Conrad’s alternative and interchangeable metaphors for the structure of language that we, like Marlow, interpret in the pursuit of discovery.

I suggest, then, that the horror that assails Marlow has to do with the impossibility of disclosing a central core, an essence, even a ground to what Kurtz has done and what he is. There is no central thread in the weave of the evidences that constitute his character, much less no deep center to his existence as a surface of signs. So when our critics puzzle over Kurtz’s absence when Marlow finds him gone from his cabin, we may offer the alternative conclusion that Kurtz’s absence is itself a sign for his meaning, one which is “short” or “wanting.”

Hence Marlow’s puzzlement at Kurtz’s absence takes on a direct and precise meaning within our present perspective:

I think I would have raised an outcry if I had believed my eyes. But I didn’t believe them at first—the thing seemed so impossible. The fact is I was completely unnerved by a sheer blank fright, pure abstract terror, unconnected with any distinct shape of physical danger. What made this emotion so overpowering was—how shall I define it?—the moral shock I received, as if something altogether monstrous, intolerable to thought and odious to the soul, had been thrust upon me unexpectedly. This lasted of course the merest fraction of a second, and then the usual sense of commonplace, deadly danger, the possibility of a sudden onslaught and massacre, or something of the kind, which I saw impending, was positively welcome and composing. It pacified me, in fact, so much that I did not raise an alarm. (141)

Marlow’s “fright” and “terror” are responses to the “sheer blank” and “pure abstract[ion]” of Kurtz’s self-evident absence, even though—or rather, because—it is “unconnected with any distinct shape,” especially the “physical.” Thus the promise of presence, no matter in how terrible a form—“a sudden onslaught or massacre, or something of the kind”—is “positively welcome” and pacifying to Marlow’s “altogether monstrous” realization that presence itself is a fiction.

Marlow, however, plays little tricks on himself to instill a sense of ground in the absence he sees in presence, where there is “nothing underfoot” (150). When the harlequin, for example, tells him that the text he thinks is cipher is really Russian, Marlow feels a momentary relief, as though Russian were a more natural, or grounded, code than cipher. Indeed, Marlow grants such a reassuring, and fictive, priority to Russian much as he prefers to accent the plain sense of a word like “degradation” (144) in order to make Kurtz apprehensible to him. Like “wanting” or like “short,” after all, “degradation”—which seems only to mean besotted or dirty, with all its echoes of soil and ground—has a second layer of meaning, too. This alternative signified suggests the sense of “not even ‘spectral,’ ” that is, “gradation” that has been neutralized (de-graded) or decomposed, so that even the prismatic grades of light promised by the narrator’s “spectral” definition of meaning early in the tale are absent in Kurtz’s radical case. Thus Marlow is quite literal when he says, “I could not appeal in the name of anything high or low” (144), since Conrad finally drains Kurtz of all distinguishing, differential, nameable qualities, rendering him the “blank” (52, 141) that affrights Marlow most of all.

Now perhaps we can be more precise about why *Heart of Darkness* is Marlow’s story. It is the narrative of a consciousness at odds with itself in an exemplary way. Marlow’s tension is a lateral one, between two notions of the world—one present, one absent; “wanting” or *kurtz* in both senses—with two grammars or vocabularies to match. Indeed, this is the unspoken tension we have seen in Guerard’s critical language, too, with its oscillation between contradictory rhetorics, an oscillation that now appears to be a response to the self-divided discourse of the narrative itself.

I should point out, of course, how my own reading of the text falls into a myth of presence of its own. My contention, for example, that Marlow’s conflict is one “between two notions of the world with grammars to match” suggests that there are extra-linguistic ideas, ideas which exist independently of the language through which, by which—the nature of language prevents me from not blundering—they are expressed. I simply cannot make any kind of statement that will not assume the independent existence of things or ideas apart from language. “Language,” says Jacques Derrida, “bears within itself the necessity of its own critique.”<sup>17</sup> Moreover, some of the terms I have employed in my own critical language—“key,” for example, or “layer”—contradict the very deconstruction and decentering of presence and depth that I have attempted to show at work in the novel.

So the problematic meaning of Marlow’s quest finally issues from Conrad’s concern with the problematics of all meaning in *Heart of Darkness*. Rather than a psychological work, *Heart of Darkness* is a text that interrogates the epistemological status of the language in which it inheres. From this point of view, Conrad’s novel joins the tradition from which our present deconstructive moment in criticism also derives. As Derrida himself has made plain, we are dealing with nothing less than a departure from classic Cartesian thinking, in which the time-honored assumptions we make about the status of language and the world are subject to the



kind of deconstruction announced by Nietzsche and extended by him, and by figures like Pater and Freud, into our own moment of criticism. We are left with nothing less than a critique of our normal stipulation that being is presence, and, within the sphere of criticism, with a critique of our belief that literary texts entertain a subject/object relation to states of the world and to their own meanings. Even to the extent that we may wish to encounter our psychological critics on the ground of Freud, Freud's work constitutes a pre-eminent critique of presence in its own right, insistent as it is on the linguistic or representational status of dreams in particular and of mental functioning in general. And like Conrad, Freud's writing also constitutes a network of discourse in ironic relation to its own discoveries.

*Heart of Darkness* and its meaning, then, do not stand apart from one another in a subject/object relation the way our critics, in their various ways, like to assume. Even the story's title is a paradox or riddle designed to tempt its interpreters rather than to locate for us a heart or center that does not exist. It is not Guerard's "psychic need" or "literary tact"<sup>19</sup>—nor is it Guetti's "alinguistic" truth—that keeps the details of Kurtz's experiences or their meaning at a remove from us in the story. Instead, it is the meaning of the story that keeps Kurtz's meaning absent, and, indeed, that makes of absence the ground of presence itself.

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#### NOTES

1. Stephen A. Reid, "The 'Unspeakable Rites' in *Heart of Darkness*," *Modern Fiction Studies*, 9 (Winter 1963-1964), 351.
2. Leo Gurko, *Joseph Conrad: Giant in Exile* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), p. 151.
3. Albert J. Guerard, *Conrad the Novelist* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1958), p. 36.
4. See Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966; Paris: Librairie Plon, 1962).
5. Guerard, p. 36.
6. Guerard, p. 39.
7. Guerard, p. 41.
8. Guerard, p. 39.
9. Guerard, p. 41.
10. Sigmund Freud, "The Antithetical Meaning of Primal Words," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-1966), XI, 156.
11. Freud, XI, 157.
12. Freud, XI, 157-158.
13. James Guetti has also shown that Marlow "admits that it is impossible" to "look beneath the surface," although his reasons for why "language . . . fails to discover the meaning of Kurtz and of experience" are simply that "the reality of experience lies beyond language" and that "the essentials of experience remain . . . alinguistic"; see "'Heart of Darkness' and the Failure of the Imagination," *Sewanee Review*, 83 (Summer 1965), 498, 500, 501, 502.

14. See Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in *The Structuralist Controversy*, ed. Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), pp. 247-265.
15. It is interesting to note that Freud himself discovered the same kind of decentering when he searched in vain for the primal scene of seduction during his researches in the 1890's; see Jean Laplanche, *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), pp. 31-32.
16. Mario D'Avanzo has also noticed the similarity between the harlequin's motley and the map in Brussels, but finds in both only a recurrent "symbol" for "disorder"; see "Conrad's Motley as an Organizing Metaphor," *College Language Association Journal*, 9 (March 1966), 289-291.
17. Derrida, p. 254.
18. See, for example, "Differance," in Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena, and other essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), pp. 148ff.
19. Guerard, p. 40.

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Concordia University, Montreal, Quebec, is planning a conference on May 3-5, 1979 to mark the centenary of the birth of E. M. Forster. Major addresses by scholars of international reputation and seminar papers and discussions will be included. Seminar papers (about 10 pages) should arrive by October 15, 1978. Send to: Prof. Judith Herz, English Department Loyola Campus, Concordia University, Montreal, Quebec, H4B 1R6.